

USING REFLECTIVE THINKING TO ENHANCE DECISION SKILLS, CULTURAL SENSITIVITY, AND TEAMWORK

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In this paper, we describe combining a reflective thinking technique (reflection-on-action/reflection-in-action) and the Myers-Briggs Personality Indicator to prepare students for meaningful and successful participation in the global environment of marketing. We discuss the practical considerations of using this pedagogy. Results from a pre- and posttest are provided, as well as a discussion of its adaptability to other settings.

PROBLEM ADDRESSED BY TEACHING INNOVATION

We needed a way to better prepare students to meaningfully and successfully participate in the global environment of international business and marketing. The students need enhanced decision skills that are informed by understanding the complexities of working with people who have differing perceptions and experiences of culture. They can learn to draw upon their cognitive skills of reflective thinking to integrate knowledge and demonstrate cultural sensitivity.

SIGNIFICANCE TO THE PROGRAM CURRICULUM AND COURSE OBJECTIVES

Designing an appropriate teaching learning method to meet this challenge is important for two reasons: critical success factors for students in any aspect of international business—marketing particularly—are an understanding of self and others and being able to quickly make sense of culturally complicated situations; and international business curriculum goals are linked to missions of our institutions and, thus, are appropriately embedded into the learning objectives of the global marketing and man-

agement courses. These mission-linked goals are teamwork, cultural sensitivity, and reflective thinking skills. In addition to being linked to the missions, these skills are noted by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) International as critical for a quality business education and are listed among the Association of American Colleges and Universities Essential Learning Outcomes. Specifically, in the international marketing course, the learning objectives are:

- to enhance marketing management decision skills by developing the professional mind-set of *reflection-on-action* and *reflection-in-action*;
- to gain understanding of the impact of culture in the business environment; and
- to solve complex problems by developing an effective and high-performing team.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TEACHING INNOVATION

We combined the three learning objectives into a process and packaged them in a way so that students are able to synthesize and apply knowledge to *intentionally learn* about themselves and others in the context of accomplishing collaborative work. The Myers-Briggs type indicator (MBTI) (Briggs and Myers-Briggs 1993) provides students a frame for exploring and assessing a variety of their personal preferences (e.g., communication style, decision style, promptness or procrastination, short- versus long-term planning, spontaneity, or reserved expression) and the preferences of their teammates. Using reflective thinking to consciously analyze and respond to personality issues, students are able to enhance teamwork—solving complex problems collaboratively with people of differing backgrounds and personalities and analyzing the interactions among team members with an eye toward how members' similarities and differences

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affect overall team functioning and team decision making. As cultural differences are embedded in the course content, students are then able to extend their thinking to include the impact of culture on collaboration.

TEACHING INNOVATION PROCESS

We start with the directions for a significant team term assignment and establish the imperative for understanding and valuing diversity, interpersonal qualities, and cultural dynamics of team members in order to successfully accomplish the assignment. After establishing the imperative for meaningful collaboration, we introduce reflective thinking as a pragmatic skill to continuously improve overall team performance.

In the international marketing course, for example, students are required to complete an international marketing plan, taking a new product to an emerging market; it represents 40 percent of the total grade. This is a multifaceted and complex task requiring innovation and creativity, which are requisite for a team project. The scope of the term project impresses upon students the need to collaborate meaningfully, effectively, and efficiently. A portion of the 40 percent is dedicated to the quality of their teamwork efforts and the focus on continuous team improvement. Electronically submitted peer team member evaluations (SurveyMonkey.com or zoomerang.com) combined with routine reflective thinking entries, shared solely with faculty via looping e-mail, formed the basis for evaluating teamwork skills. Students are placed in teams with people they had not worked with previously and who they did not know in a meaningful social context. Students' "fear factors" are elevated by not being able to choose people they know and by having a significant portion of the final grade determined by dependence on these "strangers."

In preparation for the team collaboration, we require students to complete an MBTI online and order the MBTI Team Report (www.cpp.com/products/mbti/index.aspx). The Team Report provides each person with a personality inventory and describes the synergies and weaknesses that will likely be present when that person collaborates within their designated team. Faculty have options regarding how they chose or not chose to introduce this material; further, faculty can outsource to the school's career services or counseling center or use free MBTI-based programs (for instance, one is found at Keirse.com). Over the years, we have used outsourcing and free online programs and all work well.

Students meet outside class, within their personal comfort zones, to share about the suggested findings from the MBTI, and then team members discuss the team's strengths

and weaknesses in an effort to maximize the collective strengths and shore up any weaknesses. Students are also asked to identify specific potentials for personality conflicts based on the results of the MBTI. We require a brief synopsis summarizing the above as the means of validating this first important team meeting and prepare a handout for directions.

The innovation is in using MBTI and reflective thinking to enhance the team collaboration and give the students a common language by which to analyze the team's functioning. The problem for us, having done this for years, is how to ensure a deeper, richer, more lasting learning outcome. The challenge is in determining what is meant by reflective thinking in the context of international marketing and business. What relevance does this concept hold for students who have been exposed to obligatory end-of-chapter critical thinking questions or other critical/reflective methods throughout their schooling? The "aha" teaching innovation was introducing a simple framework of reflective thinking from Schön's work (1983). He observed processes of reflection-on-action and, most importantly, reflection-in-action during the day-to-day practice of successful managers. Schön described a reflective thinking process that has the pragmatic relevance so demanded by business students, especially international business students. The key to teaching this process is in creating a type of laboratory setting (the teamwork requirement) for students to practice reflective thinking as a performance-enhancing technique and to receive coaching from the faculty on continuous improvement.

Students become acquainted with reflective thinking by the professors embedding the explanation of the technique into the directions for the term project. Reflective thinking is presented as a means of deepening the level of decision skills as practiced in the "laboratory" setting of their team's collaboration. Students have a frame for analyzing and evaluating the team's functioning using the MBTI and the MBTI Team Report.

International marketing and business courses contain content dealing with cultural dynamics (<http://stuwww.uvt.nl/~csmeets/>) or high-low context cultures (www.culture-at-work.com/highlow.html) and other frameworks. These frameworks are macro views of overarching cultural characteristics; yet as students study these macro frameworks and then have the opportunity to combine this learning with the insights about their own and others' behaviors and attitudes, suddenly the study of culture and its impact is made very personal. For instance, when discussing the high-low context of culture, students have an immediate frame of reference of how the culture clash could occur between these

two dynamics by simply reflecting on the “E” (extrovert) and the “I” (introvert) characteristics on the MBTI. They may have seen the conflict arise within their team.

Students submit reflective thinking entries via looping e-mails (one e-mail document sent between each student and the faculty in order to record all entries in one document for review) to the professor for coaching. A meaningful developmental process must engage the professor as a coach. Students reevaluate a team meeting’s positive or negative events using the framework from Boud, Keogh, and Walker:

- *Return to the event:* Who was involved? What happened/what was said? Describe salient points.
- *Attend to feelings:* What emotional dynamics preceded the event? Was present during the event? What emotions lingered afterward? How will these feelings add or detract to the team’s functioning? What needs be bridged or mended and between whom?
- *Reevaluate the event:* What were the causative factors? Can MBTI characteristics or cultural perceptives explain any of the situation? (1985, pp. 26–27)

The professor reads the e-mails and sends coaching messages: “You have done a good job evaluating the interplay of the MBTI dynamics.” “Can this person’s procrastination be explained by his or her personality inventory? If so, how can you approach him or her in a nonthreatening way?” “Kim is Japanese, what in her cultural upbringing could explain her behavior?”

The most important message to send is: “Think about the next meeting, how you can change the dynamic?” “What will you say the next time this happens?” “What will you do next time?” This enables the student to put the process of reflection into a pragmatic action for improving the team functioning.

The goals of coaching are to heighten the students’ sensitivity to the dynamics unfolding throughout the collaborative process, provide assistance in looking for meaningful explanations, stimulate planning of future-oriented actions that enable fostering of a positive team culture that is inclusive, and correct attitudes and behaviors that hamper high performance. Reflective processes without coaching from the professor are not effective. Through coaching, students can learn to bring the reflective practice into the moment of the encounter—thus, reflection-*in-action*.

IMPACT ON LEARNING

Students learn that they can develop a process of reflective thinking and ultimately bring it forward into the moment of an event rather than in the retrospective. This technique is a cognitive skill and mental discipline that will lead to more

efficient and effective decisions with and about people with different personalities or from different cultures.

ASSESSING THE INNOVATION AND RESULTS

Our goal was to enable students to learn a powerful mental discipline of reflective thinking to enhance decision skills, cultural sensitivity, and teamwork. We administered a Likert scale questionnaire to 48 students as a pre- and posttest to assess if students perceived a difference in their ability to use reflective thinking from the beginning to the end of the term. Questions were asked specific to the process of reflective thinking and the benefits derived. At the end of the term, 77 percent (up from 48 percent) indicated good or excellent in describing their ability to “thoughtfully and deeply reflect on the implications of your actions during an encounter/situation with others.” Overall, 90 percent of students (up from 60 percent) perceived improvement in their ability to be mindful of the contextual dynamics during collaboration.

We have also used essay questions on tests or a final reflection paper on what was learned by applying reflective thinking to understand oneself and others in the context of team dynamics, personality, and cultural differences. Students have gained deeper insights into themselves and solidified their learning by writing a summary of the insights they gained, either as an essay test question or end of term paper.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED WHEN USING THIS INNOVATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Initial Attitude of Students

Business students, as a whole, tend to exhibit personality qualities that lean toward being practical, expedient, and means-end oriented. Unless presented as a utilitarian tool with immediate benefits, business students tend to resist and resent the concept of reflective thinking and journaling. One student articulated it beautifully when he came up after class and said, “What does reflective thinking have to do with international marketing? This isn’t a literature course.” Faculty must articulate and reinforce the value of reflective thinking in explicit, pragmatic terms. We did not discuss reflective thinking as a valuable skill for lifelong learning or to enhance learning in general, but rather as a means to an end: enhanced efficiency and productivity, and continuous process improvement of team collaboration to produce a quality project—the term project. This approach is one that international marketing and business students

value—it is means-end oriented and practical. On course evaluations, it is common to receive comments wherein the students voice the initial skepticism felt about being required to include the reflective thinking process but conclude with recounting the value of the technique to solving problems experienced during the team process and, occasionally, even mention applications of the technique into other areas of his or her life.

Grading

Faculty may not be comfortable evaluating the quality of a student's personal reflection; however, this process can be simple and fair by establishing the criteria for evaluation. For example, students will use Myers-Briggs concepts to explain issues within the team. Students will identify and explain the possible relationship of a team member's cultural background, gender, and so forth to the event/issue. The faculty member is able to clearly judge if the student is meeting that criteria. Reflective thinking is to be used to enhance decision skills, cultural sensitivity, and teamwork, not simply express feelings or record in a diary what occurred.

Faculty Time Management

Over the years, we have focused on reducing the time on task and complexity of coaching each student. By using a looping e-mail, the past comments of student and professor are ever present: no documents need to be opened and closed, no papers need to be collected, handled, grades recorded, and returned. The subject line of the looping e-mail can be used to keep a running record of each reflective entry. For example, "R1+" can be used to mean that the first reflection was good, and each reflective entry thereafter can be recorded in the e-mail subject line to make a running record. At the end of the course, a summary grade can be given—students with more "+" than "-" get higher grades. Faculty have options for creating efficiency for time on task that do not sacrifice the quality of the coaching.

ADAPTABILITY TO OTHER COURSES AND EDUCATIONAL LEVELS

Students in upper-level or graduate courses will find the experience of applying reflective thinking to enhance their collaborative skills more meaningful if they have had a few group project experiences with the characteristic frustra-

tions and disappointments that seemingly plague college group projects or workplace teams. They will also appreciate the coaching from the professor toward the end of their academic career. As described, the innovation of a pragmatic reflective thinking technique is highly adaptable to a variety of courses. Embedding a pragmatic reflective thinking technique, as described here, fosters students' interpersonal development, reinforces concepts of cultural sensitivity, and situates teamwork as a process of accomplishing work collaboratively with people, different from oneself on many dimensions, and as a process to successfully accomplish work that is in need of continuous improvement.

Reflective thinking processes can also be used in creative ways to intensify students' engagement with the material. For instance, reflective thinking has been adapted and extended to an MBA course dealing with entrepreneurial marketing. The course takes place over the entire time students are matriculating toward their degree and consists of several thematic seminars conducted each semester. At the conclusion of each thematic block, students are required to turn in a paper that applies lessons learned in the seminars. The students must reflect on the content and then project its future applications. The paper is not a review of content; rather, the students' deconstruct the material and then build up the lessons learned that will contribute to specific actions they will apply in launching a new business or in providing advice to a friend who is considering the launch of a business.

Students are asked to regard, and assemble, their reflective papers as "chapters" in a personalized handbook on launching and managing a business. Because the class takes place over 32 months, the reflective "chapters" are necessary to prepare a comprehensive paper, which integrates functional business tools and theory into lessons for future entrepreneurial or management situations. The comprehensive, personalized handbook synthesizes the lessons contained throughout their time in the program and via a reflective process and future-forward thinking; it is not a simple "cut and paste" of the previous papers.

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